

Was Colonel Durnford wearing a coat on 21 May 1879?  
Frances Colenso and 'Offy' Shepstone disagree

By Dr Charles Swaisland

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Given the overwhelming nature of the Zulu victory at Isandlwana, the appalling slaughter on both sides and the important questions raised and not yet fully answered, this seems a curious and trivial one to ask. But it was one which destroyed a friendship, helped produce a military court of inquiry and may have shortened a soldier's career and the life of a tubercular patient. Research has not yet produced a clear answer; what one concludes depends upon which of the several claimant witnesses strikes one as most reliable. What those who raised the question at the time hoped to do was clear Brevet Colonel Anthony Durnford of blame for the British disaster and pin it firmly where they believed it belonged - on Lord Chelmsford. (1)

First, the principal actors. Observers at the time and historians since - a filmmaker, too - have claimed that Durnford and Frances Ellen, second daughter of the Bishop of Natal, were in love. (2) There is no direct evidence of the existence, let alone intensity, of such affection in either. Indeed, unless 'all that pretty furniture that the Colonel had made for my rooms' (3) qualifies, there is a total lack of even circumstantial evidence of anything other than friendship on his part, but much of warm attachment on hers.

Frances was a very attractive woman of lively, if somewhat emotional, personality, an authoress and artist. Like her sisters, Harriette and Agnes, and brothers Robert and Frank, (4) she was a warm partisan of the Zulu cause. Objectivity was not her most obvious trait. (5)

The obsessive zeal with which she strove to clear Durnford of blame for Isandlwana may have been spurred by a sense of guilt that she 'did not send a thought in that direction' on the day of the battle, for which she imposed upon herself every 22 January the penalty of a day of silence and fasting, but the driving force was her devotion to him and his memory. (6) She tended the grave at Fort Napier in Pietermaritzburg where, at the instance of the Colenso family, he had been re-buried. She longed for one of her brothers to name a son 'Durnford', (7) and when, after one of her visits to Anthony's parents in Southsea, she wrote to Sophie, Frank Colenso's wife, she referred to 'the two women who loved him best - his mother being one' it is safe to assume that the other was herself. (8)

The other principal actor was Theophilus Shepstone Junior - widely known as 'Offy' - lawyer son of Sir Theophilus, for many years Secretary for Native Affairs in the Natal Government and, at the end of a long career, Administrator of the annexed Transvaal. (9) Offy, as captain commanding the Natal Carbineers in Lord Chelmsford's column, missed action at Isandlwana when the General took to the south-east a large part of the encamped force in fruitless search of what was thought to be the main Zulu army. When Major-General Marshall took a mounted force to the battlefield on 21 May, Offy was with it. He collected papers from the body of his brother, Captain George Shepstone, Political Officer with Durnford's column, and a couple of rings and a small knife from that of Durnford for the Colensos to send to his parents.

When burying Durnford in a donga under a pile of stones, Offy was helped by Seaward Longhurst, Veterinary Surgeon with the King's Dragoon Guards, who, in a letter to a friend in England, claimed that Shepstone also removed from the body a packet of shape and size that suggested that it might have held official documents. (10) When the story reached Frances, she jumped to the conclusion that Chelmsford's last order to Durnford was in it and approached Offy, only to be assured that, had there been any papers, he would have sent them to her with the other things. (11) She persisted and on 20 April 1882 he expressed surprise 'at your doubting the veracity of my statement as to what I found on Colonel Durnford's body', adding that Captain Longhurst's statement as regards papers is a "deliberate untruth". (12) Three years later, when he had determined to apply for a court of inquiry, he was 'glad to remember that your Father called at my house and in my wife's presence expressed his belief in my denial of Mr. Longhurst's statement'. (13)

Helen Shepstone suffered greatly as she struggled to maintain their long-standing friendship (14) in the face of Frances Colenso's ruthless pursuit of her objective. Frances believed that if only Helen could be persuaded of her husband's guilt her influence over him would produce a private confession which would save him from public disgrace and clear the way for attack on the real target - Lord Chelmsford. So Helen was told of the suspicions and 'evidence' against Offy, but was unconvinced, so Frances continued to press the case.

People think me hard for taking the part I have, but I cannot help it.... And while I  
live no power on earth shall prevent my doing all in my power to discover the truth. I  
would not pause though it lost me every friend I have. (15)

Despite concluding that obsession had warped her friend's judgement, (16) Helen longed for resolution and reconciliation (16), but in June 1886, shortly after the Court of Inquiry which cleared Offy of the charge, and when Frances was on her way to England, she broke off communication. (17) The innocent victim, she could take no

more. Two of Frances's important supporters were Edward Durnford, retired Lt. Colonel in the Royal Marine Artillery and author of two pamphlets and a book in his brother's defence, (18) and Lt. Colonel Charles Luard, one of Anthony Durnford's successors in Natal, who pressed Horse Guards and the War Office to review the question of Durnford's alleged responsibility.

When Sir Bartle Frere, High Commissioner in South Africa, referred in a cable to Isandlwana as 'poor Durnford's misfortune' he gave a measure of official approval to a view of the latter towards which some in Natal were already disposed. His aloofness counted arrogance; Durnford was not popular in the Colony, where many held him responsible for the debacle at Bushman's Pass when three white volunteers were killed. (19) Being an intimate of those notorious 'kaffirboeties', the Colensos, did not help. After Isandlwana, baseless, indeed malicious, rumours circulated about his personal conduct on the field, one being that, unable to face up to his responsibility for misjudgement, he retired to a tent in the camp and shot himself. Marshall's visit to Isandlwana on 21 May set the record straight, the General reporting that nothing could have been 'a more complete refutation of all charges brought against Colonel Durnford' than the battlefield as he had found it. (20)

The implication that it was Durnford's failure to take command as ordered which led to the loss of the Camp was given further currency and apparent official affirmation by Lord Chelmsford in the House of Lords on 19 August 1880. (21) When making his statement he may have believed that Lt. Colonel J.N Crealock, his Acting Military Secretary, had correctly recalled the text of the final order that was missing. The latter's notebook containing the copy had also been lost, either left in his tent, or as Chelmsford's column spent a harrowing night on the battlefield on the way back to Natal. Found later and returned to the owner, it was in Crealock's hands when Chelmsford spoke. Neither the copy, nor the original when it came to light some years later, mentioned taking command of the Camp. (22) Did Chelmsford knowingly mislead the House and, a few days later, the readers of *The Times*? (23) Lt. General Sir Leicester Smyth, officer Commanding at the Cape and Acting High Commissioner, when letting Frances Colenso know that he thought Durnford had acted with sound reason, was probably right in deploring Chelmsford's statement, but not believing that the latter had told an untruth. (24)

What had happened to the original of the order? Frances was in no doubt; Offy, either on his own initiative, or under instruction, had sent it on to Chelmsford or an aide for its concealment or destruction. Indeed, in the only attempt at humour detected in her writing, whether voluminous correspondence or the printed page, she wondered if a false copy was even then buried in his lordship's garden in pursuit of accelerated weathering. (25) Two seemingly impartial witnesses - Longhurst and Alfred Davis, member of the family which owned *The Natal Witness* and the paper's special correspondent on 21 May - both claimed that papers had been taken from the body. (26) Offy based his denial on the claim that, as Durnford had no coat on, there was no pocket to hold papers - ergo, no possibility of abstraction. (27) Both collected statements from troopers in support of their claims.

Except as a wrecker of relationships and cause of damage to health and career, the question was irrelevant. The original of the order was found possibly elsewhere on the field that day and, if so, perhaps in Durnford's portmanteau which had been slashed open by an assagai-stroke. Trooper A. Pearce, a Natal Carbineer, and Civil Surgeon Charles Decimus O'Grady Gubbins, Medical Officer with the 17th Lancers, both took papers from it; a fact only disclosed six years later in response to an advertisement placed in a newspaper by 'ED, the Witness Office'. (28)

In an affidavit dated 11 June 1886, which was copied to Offy and reproduced in *The Times of Natal*, Gubbins swore that to the best of his recollection what he had sent to Frances in response to the advertisement was 'an instruction from Lord Chelmsford to Colonel Durnford as to the commanding of the troops at Isandhlwana'. (29) Like Crealock, Gubbins was not immaculate in recall; less than a year before he had told her that the papers did not contain the final order (30) Harriette Colenso - a reporter of unquestionable integrity - informed *The Times of Natal* that Gubbins's parcel had contained 'nothing bearing on the events of that day at Isandhlwana'. (31)

What may be reasonably concluded from the available evidence? First, Offy Shepstone did not remove the final order from Durnford's body. (32) Second, Fred Pearce's letter about his brother's find did not claim that the final order was among the papers picked up and Adrian Greaves article in the AZWHS Journal (33) appears to make clear that it was not. However, it cannot be definitely ruled out that he was the finder, though - for reasons which appear later in this article - it is unlikely. Gubbins was certainly not the discoverer, a fact that poses another interesting question. What motivated a relatively young professional man (At 31 years of age he was unlikely to have been suffering from seriously impaired memory) who went on to become Natal's Colonial Secretary in 1906 (34) to furnish a sworn statement containing misleading information, inspiring yet another newspaper attack on the Colensos? It might have been part of Offy's campaign to clear his name.

Edward Durnford's interest was obvious; believing his elder brother wrongly blamed for the disaster, he sought to move a stubborn Field Marshal, Commander-in-Chief and an equally obdurate Secretary of State for War to review a judgement hastily taken on faulty intelligence. (35)

Luard and even more senior Royal Engineers, including Sir Andrew Clarke, Inspector-General of Fortifications and Sir Lintorn Simmons, (36) one-time commander of troops at the Cape and, from 1884 until 1888, Governor of Malta, resented the slur cast upon the Corps, especially by Lord Ellenborough who, in following Chelmsford in the House of Lords debate, not only shared the former's view of 'the unfortunate Colonel Durnford's' culpability, but gratuitously went on to deprecate the 'preconceived notions and illusions' which placed Staff Officers 'and those of Engineers on a pinnacle above officers experienced in regimental command'. Luard set out to dispel the notion, not only with Clarke's help, but, later, by attempting to restore Durnford's reputation through the Court of Inquiry set up at Offy Shepstone's request by Lt. General H. Torrens, C-in-C at the Cape. Before the inquiry opened late in March 1886, Torrens wrote to Luard:

I have taken measures to limit proceedings and to prevent, I trust, the possibility of other names, distinguished or otherwise, being dragged into it.

He also penned a note to Chelmsford on hearing that he was gratified at the action taken. Of course the General was gratified for he was safe. (37) Offy was cleared and Luard commanded to make him a public apology. (38)

Writing to Frances on 30 August 1886, then on her final visit to Britain, Luard wrote:

The further prosecution of this business about Colonel Durnford is not, I think, to be undertaken. Anything in the shape of a public exposure I should myself be extremely opposed to, as the profession to which I belong would, I fear, suffer thereby. One can prove nothing against anyone, except perhaps, against Offy, though the practical difficulties in the way of doing even that much are enormous. You can publish nothing that will not be libellous to be effective and the case is not sufficiently conclusive, or of sufficient public importance to be taken up by a member of parliament whose influence would have sufficient weight to move the mass of government, or the masses of the people.

'...I have done my best and failed. I have been told to swallow a dose - a very bitter one, and I have obeyed orders. I have seen Sir Andrew Clarke and have asked him to do nothing further in the matter'. (39)

Edward Durnford, too, was under pressure, as he made clear in replying to a letter from Frances that must have been an uncomfortable one to receive:

I am not a free agent, as you surely know.... I fear, my dear Nelly (40), you let romance run away with you a wee bit....the only course for me is to submit to the inevitable. I grieve that you take all this as you do. (41)

He then went on to defend Luard.

As regards Colonel Luard, "circumstances alter cases". You must look at his home circumstances. His wife has probably denounced his intimacy with you and demanded that it should cease. This is, of course, only my idea of the situation.

Edward then expressed a confidence in her continued handling of the case that was in reality no more than a slender hope. He was sure she would carefully think out her ideas for future action, not only of the course to be followed, but also the probable results. Then came his judgement on their efforts so far:

You see, we have come to this terrible deadlock really through impulsive action without reckoning the cost. (42)

Did Frances Colenso help or hinder the cause that took over the last seven years of her life? Impulsive, outspoken and totally obsessed, she must at times have embarrassed her collaborators in their efforts. Seeking to keep her participation from public knowledge, she had to act through Edward, Frank or Charles Luard (43) and her ideas did not always coincide with their view of what was politic or practicable. They accommodated her as far as they could, but there is evidence that sometimes they thought they could do better without her. At one stage Edward hoped his letters had persuaded her to relinquish the pursuit, as he believed he could solve the problem in time. (44) On another occasion he told Frank Colenso that Luard having taken the case up warmly as a public and service matter was 'the strongest and best footing on which the affair could be placed'. (45) But Frances was impatient. Believing she had not long to live and desperate for success, she would not give up. Just before going into the Royal National Hospital in Ventnor, Isle of Wight, in November 1886, she told sister-in-law, Sophie, that 'now we can fight', because Offy had published his version of the dispute and its outcome. (46) With 'the worst published for poor dear Colonel Luard' she hoped the latter would be willing they should publish his defence. (47)

It was not to be, for, when spring came and she was within days of leaving hospital, heart failure brought her campaigning to a close.

In his recent impartial study of Anthony Durnford, R W F Droogleever rightly summed up Frances Colenso's contribution:

It is sad that Frances Colenso had wasted her energy on what turned out to be simply a paper chase. If she had directed her abilities towards exposing the ambiguity of that final order in terms of previous orders, she might well have succeeded in vindicating Anthony Durnford's reputation. (48)

What of the man she loved? Nine months after the battle, when Anthony Durnford returned in a flag-draped coffin to the town which had snubbed and even reviled him as a military bungler and coward, the silent crowds lining the streets were reported by local newspapers as large as those which had watched the Prince Imperial's cortege pass by. They were honouring him as a hero of the last, desperate stand at Isandlwana. It was left to Sir Theophilus Shepstone (49) and historians to discuss his military competence, but never again was his courage questioned. Droogleever asks whether the role of soldier was the best for him. Nearly a century of service as Royal Engineers by successive generations of the family may have carried him into the Corps, when he had dominant qualities which could have made him as equally prominent a humanitarian as the man he so greatly admired - Bishop Colenso. (50).

One more question begs an answer. Did Frances know that the original of Chelmsford's last order to Durnford had been found? Gubbins' affidavit and *The Times of Natal* editorial claimed that she did. (51) If Fred Pearce's letter (52) enclosed that order then she would have seen it. But the letter was ambiguous and there is no firm proof either way, so an answer must be sought in her character and the tone of her correspondence. What she wanted most was confirmation that the original of the order, like Crealock's copy, contained no reference to taking command of the Camp and for that to be bruited abroad. Though she would not herself publicly have announced the discovery, she could never - would never - have been able to withhold the good news from Frank, Edward Durnford or Charles Luard. No hint of it has been found in hundreds of letters to and from members of the family and friends. When she died on 29 April 1887 she was unaware that that part of her quest had succeeded.

How, then, did the final order find its way into the Royal Engineers' Archive at Chatham? Most likely through the hands of senior members of the Corps. If that was so, why did Luard not let Frances know of the discovery? Perhaps he, too, at the time did not know of it. It is possible that that problem will remain unsolved.

## References.

1. Frances - F W Chesson, Secretary Aborigines Protection Society (APS), 13 July 1880, 'I think we should concentrate on his miserable ignorance, or neglect, of the strategic rules of war'. ASC 130/ 17.
2. Historians' claims range from Donald Morris's emotionally economical reference to discreet behaviour avoiding any breath of scandal (p226) to R B Edgerton's 'unrequited, but passionate nonetheless, love affair' (p83). The lingering glances exchanged by Burt Lancaster and Anna Calder Marshall in the film, *Zulu Dawn* were box office, 1972, not Pietermaritzburg, 1879.
3. Frances - Frank Colenso, 9 Sept 1884, describing the fire that destroyed Bishopstowe, the family home. FCP 1288/1 f 147.
4. Robert Colenso, a medical doctor, first practised in Durban and later in London. He was far less active in Zulu affairs than his brother and sisters.
5. 'As to her letter to you, (Frances) generally expresses herself vigorously'. Harriette Colenso, in mild apology to Gerald Browne, Private Secretary to the Governor of Natal, 22 April 1887, FCP1286/2a f 46a.
6. Frances - Frank, 22 Jan 1884, FCP1288/1 f 128. In another letter she wrote of her thoughts soaring in the direction of 'the heaven where he is' FCP, 1288/1
7. Frances - Sophie Colenso, 23 March 1885, FCP 1288/1 f 181. and Sunday 1887 (sic), FCP 1288/1 f 293.
8. Frances - Sophie, 4 Sept 1882. FCP 1288/1 f 74. Frances was certainly not referring to Frances, his estranged wife, with whom he was not in touch. Divorce was out of the question for an army officer wishing to maintain his career.
9. 1877 - 9.
10. About Longhurst's involvement, see Adrian Greaves, *Lt. Colonel Durnford RE and the Isandlwana Court of Enquiry*, AZWHS Journal, Fourth Edition, December 1998, p4. Also see Frances - Frank, 22 May 1882, FCP 1288/1 f 64.11. Offy Shepstone - Frances, August (1881?), PMB, Colenso Papers.
12. do 20 April 1882, PMB.

13. Offy Shepstone - Frances Colenso, 27 November 1885, PMB.
14. See, for example, Helen Shepstone - Frances Colenso, 9 Oct 1884, (PMB). Writing from England after the Bishopstowe fire, Helen longed to be with the Colensos to help, adding 'Oh why has this horrible false wall grown up between us.... goodbye now, Elinore darling'
15. Frances - Sophie Colenso, 13 March 1883, FCP 1288/1 f 89.
16. Helen - Frances, (May 1885) PMB and Frances - Sophie Colenso, 30 May 1885, FCP 1288/1 f 190.
17. Helen - Frances, 11 March and 5 June 1886, PMB
18. Edward Durnford; Pamphlet: *Isandhlwana, 22 January 1879. Narrative compiled from Official and reliable sources*, PS King, London, April 1879. Pamphlet: 'Isandhlwana. Lord Chelmsford's statements compared with the evidence', PS King 15 November 1880. The text is reproduced in his book, pp 375-9. 'A Soldier's Life and Work in South Africa 1872-9'.
19. For an account of the Bushman's River Pass incident see *The Bent Pine*, Norman Herd, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1976
20. Quoted by E Durnford at p269 in *A Soldier's Life*.
21. Hansard, 3rd Series, Volume 255, Columns 1554-1562
22. See Parliamentary Papers C2260 (1879). Lt.Colonel JN Crealock's statement forwarded by Chelmsford to Secretary of State for War, 9 February 1879. *Narrative of the Field Operations connected with the Zulu War of 1879*.
23. *The Times* 25 August 1880
24. Smyth - Frances Colenso, 10 and 29 June 1882, PMB. FW Chesson, APS, was less complimentary when, writing to Frances on 31 August 1886 (PMB); he referred to Chelmsford's 'weather-beaten moral conscience'
25. Frances - Frank Colenso, 22 May 1882, FCP 1288/1 f 64. She did not know when she wrote that Edward Durnford had received from Crealock a copy of the recovered copy.
26. Longhurst, then in Meerut, India, with his regiment, confirmed in writing what he claimed to have seen when Durnford was found. Davis, a former Carbineer, had borrowed a sick Trooper's uniform to accompany Marshall's force on 21 May.
27. Colonel Lane of the Rifle Brigade, who claimed to have been there when Durnford was buried, wrote to Offy from Halifax, Nova Scotia, after the Commission of Enquiry report had been published, to say that the body was not wearing a coat, but a waistcoat which could not possibly have held a packet of papers and that none were removed. The letter was published in *The Times of Natal* on 2 October 1886.
28. It was placed by Frances Colenso at Edward Durnford's request, according to a letter from Harriette Colenso, which appeared in *The Times of Natal* on 14 October 1886. At the time Frances was in Britain on her final visit.
29. Sworn at Newcastle, Natal, and published in *The Times of Natal*, 2 October 1886. Editorial comment suggested that Frances was holding the papers improperly and that 'but for Dr Gubbins's startling affidavit, would doubtless keep on keeping her own counsel with regard to their existence'.
30. Gubbins - Frances. 2 July 1885. PMB
31. 12 October 1886
32. Had he done so, neither he nor Chelmsford would have allowed it to fall into the hands of critics, or otherwise find its way to Chatham.
33. See Adrian Greaves, op cit, p3, for text.
34. South African Dictionary of National Biography, Vol III, p360.
35. In his book, Edward Durnford quoted several of the communications from Horse Guards and War Office rejecting his appeals - e.g. from Lt.General RCH Taylor, Adjutant General, 11 October 1882, p405, in which it was made clear that the two bodies were at one in the matter. The recent decision of the Ministry of Defence not to re-consider the findings on a helicopter crash on Mull has many echoes of the Durnford case.
36. In a letter to *The Times* of 24 August 1880.
37. Both are quoted by Droogleever at p246. However drastic internal discipline might be, hierarchical organisations tend to close when ranks faced with external criticism. As Judge Gorrie of Mauritius once pointed out, the Colonial Office usually backed their man in the field. To Chesson, APS, 12 November 1875, ASC 135/127.
38. Luard -OC Troops, Natal. The text appeared in *The Times of Natal* on 2 October 1886.
39. Luard - Frances Colenso, 30 August 1886, PMB. Clarke had tried unsuccessfully in February that year to have a correction inserted in the *Narrative of Field Operations*. On home leave in the latter part of 1886, Luard was next posted to Liverpool and retired on 21 October 1887, being promoted Major General the same day. Retiring to his native Kent, he became a Justice of the Peace and served on the County Council for 14 years. He died on 18 September 1908.
40. The name by which Frances was known to her siblings and friends.

41. E. Durnford - Frances, 17 September 1886.
42. Ibid
43. Frances - Sophie Colenso, '*Sunday 1887*' (sic), FCP 1288/1 f 293. Frances claimed that one of her reasons for having a brother call a son 'Durnford' was to 'silence all enquiries as to what I can have to do with the "case"'.  
 44. E. Durnford - Frances, 14 December 1882, PMB
45. E. Durnford - Frank Colenso, 6 January 1885, FCP 1293/6 f 1.
46. Probably in '*The Times of Natal*' 2 October 1886.
47. Frances - Sophie, 3 November 1886, FCP 1288/1 f 260. To Chesson, APS, she had earlier written  
 'I feel as though this (the Inquiry) has given me my deathblow. The wicked triumph of falsehood and wrong, and the cruel torture inflicted on that noble fellow, Colonel Luard, have nearly broken my heart'.
48. Droogleever, op cit, p246
49. '...as plucky as a lion, but as imprudent as a child'. Sir T Shepstone - Offy, 6 February 1879.
50. Droogleever, op cit, p251.
51. 2 October 1886.
52. F. Pearce - 'ED Natal Witness Office' 25 June 1885

### Acknowledgements.

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